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The Children's War: Britain, 1914-1918

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Asked to call to mind images of children and war in Britain, and the most ready association is that of children living through the ordeal of bombing and evacuation in the Second World War. *The Children's War, Britain 1914–1918* re-directs our attention to the lives of British children in the Great War. This, the first book-length study of the subject, is an account not simply of endurance and separation, but of participation through family relationships, play and learning. Unlike other historians of this period, such as Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, who have concentrated on children's literature and games purely as a form of wartime propaganda, or, like Deborah Dwork and Jay Winter, who have studied children's overall gains in health and welfare as a result of interventionist wartime policies, Rosie Kennedy is interested in 'the experience of children and the ways in which they responded to their mobilisation for war' (p.7).(1)

To do this, Kennedy uses autobiographical accounts, as well as examples of correspondence between children and their relatives at the front, now housed at the Imperial War Museum. Many letters sent by children appear to have been lost in the Flanders mud. However, their content can be inferred from carefully preserved replies, and seem to have detailed, as one might expect, all those things that mean so much to (rather privileged urban) children: pet animals, visits to Father Christmas' Grotto, and wheeled transport (in one case 'an illuminated tramcar in the form of a tank') (p. 36). As such, they offer an intriguing child's-eye view of domestic routines in war, but are hard to subject to the usual rigours of source criticism. Kennedy sets herself the immensely difficult task of reconstructing not only their content but also their emotional significance.

To aid her, Kennedy invokes Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott to place in view the mind of the child as one of psychic tensions and private imaginings; but this is not an attempt at psycho-history, and the point their inclusion serves to make is that children have an inventive, creative interior life and are not simply receptacles of their surrounding culture. Rather, the task in hand is to elucidate feeling and 'meaning', and it is with 'the myriad of cultural influences that shaped children's lives' (p. 53), and identities, that Kennedy is most concerned. This allows the lens to be widened to encompass diverse sources of pedagogical thinking, social theorising and the marketing of children's games and fiction. Here, Kennedy is on sure ground, and adept at placing the enlightening and enlivening quotation. However, the individual

children who feature in this book are mostly those of relatively well-off parents, while their surrounding 'war culture' follows that depicted by Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker in being fairly hegemonic. In fact, Kennedy takes this further, to suggest that a study of children's wartime culture 'lets us get to the very essence of how Britain's adults perceived the war and allows us to explore the methods society used to communicate with itself' (p. 19), though why propaganda or marketing material designed for children should be any more or less revealing than that designed for adults is hard to say.

One of Kennedy's first tasks is to define her subject. As she explains in chapter one,

> 'Rather than defining childhood by age range, say between 5 and 16 or 18, I came to realise, as Davin suggests, that it is experience rather than age that identifies someone more strongly with childhood … Because one of my main areas of interest is the ways in which adults directed children's attention to the war, I have chosen to concentrate only on children who are still treated as children by the adults around them.' (p. 9)

But whereas Anna Davin set out to unravel the complex ways in which a 'popular cult of childhood' arose in a period of social, economic and educational transformation between 1870 and 1914, Kennedy does not take the opportunity of pursuing the construction and function of this cult of 'innocence and irresponsibility' into the war years. In practice, Kennedy defines her subject by virtue of school attendance – 'a young person of 14 might still be at school, treated as a child by both their parents and teachers', but she does not include 'children in full-time paid work or those who lied about their age to enlist in the army' (p. 9). However Davin herself notes that children who contributed to the family economy through paid employment 'may be stuck for years in the contributory and subordinate position of a child' whatever their age.(2)

The upshot is that the subject of Kennedy's study replicates, without interrogation, the 'ideal' wartime childhood found in the famous 1915 poster 'Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War', in which two children in a comfortable home, with leisure and money for toy soldiers and books, innocently inquire whether their father has fulfilled his manly duty. This, then, skirts over the ideological function of stock wartime images of sheltered, dependent and young childhood (like that of sheltered and dependent womanhood) in signalling the barbarity of the enemy and the civilised domestic habits of the British, or in bolstering ideas of appropriately manly and womanly behaviour. Yet, whether standing by their mother's side when women of Britain said GO!, or cradled in their refugee mother's shawl, the childhoods depicted in popular propaganda images, though not designed *for* children, were nonetheless part of the cultures of war within which young people, their parents and their teachers existed. This was also the domestic ideal according to which infant welfare was increasingly measured – and mothers berated - to ensure the health of the wartime generation. But if the war gave extra resonance to the cult of the rosy-cheeked, cosseted, child, for many actual children the tentative gains of the 1870-1914 period were suspended for the duration of the conflict. Kennedy, however, devotes relatively little space to the hardships faced by poorer children.

In chapter two, 'Families at war', Kennedy concentrates on the correspondence between soldiers and their children. Fathers made much of life in the open air, depicting themselves relishing wartime escapades and sleeping in 'cubby houses' underground. Inquiries were made about school and home, and children were instructed to work hard and behave. Children, it seems, responded in kind, providing glimpses of family life that make all the more moving the sudden termination of a correspondence when a father was killed in action. Kennedy is good at suggesting the emotional charge of such otherwise banal topics, calling forth the understandable anxieties of men whose families were growing older in their absence, and the attempts made to maintain emotional bonds with tales of bravery and derring-do. Fathers, in these letters, 'became heroes in a partially invented landscape' (p. 41).

Kennedy's attempt to recreate this world of feeling rests, for the most part, on supposition, though her sensitivity to the material means that her depictions of fatherly anxiety and concern ring true. This adds a new dimension to our understanding of the intimate bonds with home that sustained men on the western

front and aided their emotional survival. However, as might be expected, the significance for children of this parental-separation, and this correspondence, remains much more elusive. One wonders how these children responded to the return of the soldier-father after years of war, especially if disabled, shell-shocked, brutalised, or just averagely bad-tempered. The historian A. L. Rowse, quoted here, considered his father's absence 'a great blessing' (p. 155). Many children had but hazy recollections of their father, and as Alan Allport's work on demobbed soldiers after the Second World War has shown, children did not always react well to the appearance of the fantasy-hero.(3)

And what of the feelings which arose when fathers did not return home? In *The Children's War* we learn of a range of responses to grief and mourning, and of differing adult expectations. A quotation from Christopher Isherwood's *Exhumations* tells of the rites of mourning at his prep school, where,

> 'the concept of Grief, as practiced by adults, was almost meaningless to us. We could only understand it in terms of drama, over which we gloated, and of social prestige, which commanded our sincere respect' (p. 44).

For Isherwood and his classmates, black crepe armbands carried a totemic quality. Elsewhere, Kennedy recounts how a relative dismissed a child's capacity for grief, 'It is a merciful thing that Freddie does not realise things' (p. 44), while a kindly teacher instructed 'sensitive and afraid' (p. 24) children whose fathers were 'missing' to put their heads on their arms to rest in class. But though much has been written on mourning and commemoration after the Great War, the wider social expectations concerning children and mourning remain sketchy: it is unclear if Isherwood's pagan cult of the dead and the school-boys' re-configuration of the symbols of adult mourning were products of an upper-class 'stiff upper lip', or spoke more generally of the way in which children make their own meaning – certainly the wartime revival of traditional religious forms and the rise of superstition cannot have offered the same consolation for the young and uninitiated, and one can only guess how talk of ghosts on the western front haunted the childhood imagination.

Chapter three, 'A war imagined', opens with the marketing and consumption of war-themed games for children and the diverting details of the pre-war Anglo-German toy rivalry, in which the superior solid-metal German soldier held the advantage. Kennedy depicts British manufacturers' eagerness to tap into this expanding consumer market for children once war had been declared and German imports had been banned. She also analyses the stock characters and formulaic plots of popular juvenile fiction. War stories aimed at boys, such as Brereton's *Under Haig in Flanders* (1918), typically featured brave British soldiers enjoying steaming mugs of cocoa before a 'spree' into enemy territory to fight sneaky and underhand Germans.

In fiction for girls, Kennedy detects a desire on the part of female authors to explore some of the opportunities open to women in wartime, as well as to reassure readers that such workers had lost none of their feminine charm. Toy nurses were popular during the war, but Kennedy has been unable to find their fictional counterparts in print. To account for this, Kennedy postulates that, 'Women writers wanted a proactive role for their heroines, where they took part in the war as active participants, rather than responding to its horrors by caring for others wounded in action' (p. 77). But there was at least one notable exception. *Pickles: A Red Cross Heroine* (1916) by Edith Kenyon, a prolific author of girls' fiction, tells the story of a 'tomboy tamed' type of heroine who became a Red Cross nurse.(4) This story is accompanied by photographs of nurses working in temporary hospitals during the war, which also suggests that older girls encountered the iconography of the 'ministering angel' by other means, whether through fundraising material or one of the numerous nursing memoirs published at this time. If, as Kennedy proposes, imbibing a highly gendered wartime culture forged 'an identification … that may have stayed with the children for the rest of their lives' (p. 70), then the source of these impressions is important.

In the introduction, Kennedy declares an interest in understanding how, 'these adults of the future [were] shaped by their childhood experiences' (p. 11), though this is never fully explored. Writing about the

relationship between masculinity and militarism, Michael Roper has proposed that masculine subjectivities were altered by the experience of fear during the Great War and the rise of a vernacular psychoanalytic language to describe it. But what of those who grew up reading heroic fiction and playing with toy nurses during the war? What, asks Roper, were the 'personal implications of these discursive shifts' for the succeeding generation?(5) As Kennedy herself reminds us, autobiographies of childhoods spent during the Great War were written in this post-war age of popular psychoanalysis and reflected 'an understanding of the importance of childhood experiences in shaping the adult self' (p. 11). The structure and form of these autobiographies, as well as their sensibilities, would, then, have seemed ripe for an inquiry into the place of war, but also of the new sciences of the mind, in this younger generation's sense of selfhood, and in particular their gendered identities.

Chapters four (Children in uniform) and five (War in the classroom) are the longest and most detailed of the book. While the preceding chapters are concerned with children's domestic lives, here attention turns to how children were organised, educated and deployed. Kennedy provides a useful overview of the scholarship on social attitudes towards the young in early 20th-century Britain, looks at the wartime role of civil societies and Local Education Authorities, and considers the extent of children's public participation in the war. She warns against assuming that the nation's young were militarised or indoctrinated with jingoistic maxims in the years before and during the war years. The self-sacrificing soldier was held up as 'the epitome of successful character training' (p. 100) amidst fears of delinquency and moral laxity, but the point was to instil in the young a sense of honour and the virtues of obedience. In the classroom, the war was taught as a means of engaging pupils with their lessons, as well as educating them in British imperial duty and international responsibility. Children themselves may have revelled in all things military; but this was not always the intention.

We are familiar with the contribution of the women who took up new roles and longer hours to free men for the front and to make ends meet; we are less used to considering children's war-work. Yet in *The Children's War* we find Girl Guides undertaking a variety of auxiliary caring and catering roles (seemingly treated as VADs-in-waiting), and Scouts and members of the Boys' Brigade officially retained by the Admiralty as substitute coastguards and employed by hospitals and government departments as messengers and errand boys. Kennedy offers us a salutary reminder of this voluntary service: though a more complete picture of children's war-work would have included greater consideration of the children who gave up school for paid employment and the legion of 12 year old half-timers who did hours of illegal overtime to subsidise the family income. Astonishingly, in August 1917, the Board of Education conceded that 600,000 such children had been put 'prematurely' to work in the war; in addition, an unknown number of 'little mothers' missed school in order to care for younger siblings.(6)

In these final two chapters, Kennedy reconstructs the experience of the child in the Great War, but this book's more ambitious attempt to gauge how they actually felt remains tantalisingly out of reach. Likewise though we are told that 'war-themed toys during the First World War helped to shape the identities of those children who grew up playing with them' (p. 56), the full implication of what this meant for this generation's subjective sense of self is left hanging. As Kennedy has found, children's own words offer immensely appealing source material; the difficulty is what, as an historian, to make of their very charming childishness. Here, the recollections of early 20th-century childhood found in oral history accounts by Anna Davin and Stephen Humphries, though produced by adults and not children, may have offered the chance to interpret the place of the war in their life-histories.(7) They would also have complemented Kennedy's focus on the artefacts and curricula marketed and designed explicitly for children, and on those children of families fortunate enough to be able to afford them, by revealing how the broader cultures of war shaped the lives of young people, including the poor. Yet it is the achievement of this book that, when recently confronted with a photograph of British children attending the Armistice Day commemorations, their deceased fathers' medals pinned to their coats, my mind turned immediately to Kennedy's invocation of the need to reflect on the emotional and psychological significance of children's participation in the Great War, and of the importance of considering soldiers not just as husbands and sons, but as fathers too.

Notes

1. S. Audoin-Rouzeau and A. Becker, 'Children and the Primary Schools of France, 1914-1918' in *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War*, ed. J. Horne (Cambridge, 1997); D. Dwork, *War is Good for Babies and Other Young Children – A History of the Infant and Child Welfare Movement in England 1898–1918* (London, 1987); J. Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (Basingstoke, 2003).Back to (1)
2. A. Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home, School and Street in London, 1870–1914* (London, 1996), pp.3, 5, 2.Back to (2)
3. A. Allport, *Demobbed: Coming Home After the Second World War* (New Haven, CT, 2009).Back to (3)
4. E. Kenyon, *Pickles: A Red Cross Heroine* (London, 1917).Back to (4)
5. M. Roper, 'Between manliness and masculinity: the "War Generation" and the psychology of fear in Britain, 1914–1950', *Journal of British Studies*, 44, 2 (April 2005), 361.Back to (5)
6. Quoted in G. DeGroot, *Blighty: British Society in the Era of the Great War* (London, 1996), p. 220. Back to (6)
7. S. Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels? An Oral History of Working-Class Childhood and Youth 1899-1939* (Oxford, 1981); S. Humphries & R. Van Emden, *All Quiet on the Home Front: An Oral History of Life in Britain during the First World War* (London, 2003).Back to (7)

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